

## Discussing Underage Drinking

The first step in preventing underage drinking is to talk about it. Underage drinking in Vermont is a problem that will not go away on its own, and even if you think your child may have already started drinking, it's never too late to start the conversation. This section covers some general ideas on how to address underage drinking with your children as they grow up.

Here are some general tips to keep in mind when talking to your child about underage drinking—regardless of age:

- In two parent homes, parents need to work together and practice what they will say. Establish rules together before discussing them with your child.
- Be consistent
- Know your facts. Give your children age-appropriate information about alcohol use. We've provided some examples later in this handout.
- Use short, simple explanations and teachable moments. Take advantage of the time you already spend together, like going to and from school and other activities, or afterschool time spent at home.
- Your child will ask questions, so listen and be ready to answer.
- Use conversations rather than lectures. Remember—it's not an interrogation.
- Talk about your values and feelings.
- Discuss images on television and in movies that glamorize alcohol.
- Be aware of your own alcohol use around your children and set a positive example.
- Talk about your own experiences or people you've known who have had issues with alcohol.
- Stay calm and avoid unrealistic threats.
- Tell you child you love him/her.
- You must listen as well.

### Grade School

Start talking about alcohol with your child at an early age. Give her accurate information about the dangers and side effects of alcohol use. Points to remember include:

- Alcohol enters the blood stream and can affect the entire body.
- Overdrinking over a long period of time can damage organs including the liver, pancreas, kidneys and bone marrow.
- Drinking can lower inhibitions and lead to risky or dangerous behavior.
- When used in large amounts, alcohol can be a depressant and cause excessive sleep, blackouts or coma.

- Drinking too much alcohol can cause alcohol poisoning and even death.
- Alcohol can make some people stressed, angry and violent.
- Drinking alcohol before age 21 is illegal and can interfere with healthy brain development.

Answer any questions that your child asks—don't assume they are too young. If you don't have the answer, it's okay, you can find out together. Use the examples given above to discuss why adults may drink but children may not, and always be clear that you don't want your child to start drinking until he is 21 years old.

## **Middle School**

Around this age, children start forming tighter friendships at school and begin doing things on their own. Children start to define their personal boundaries and comfort zones, and you should continue to discuss underage drinking:

- Explain the difference between responsible drinking, binge drinking (five or more drinks in two hours) and alcohol dependence.
- Discuss alcohol dependence and explain that for some people, a single alcoholic drink can be too much.
- Be sure to know your child's friends and their parents.
- Make sure your child knows that parents talk to each other, and you hear what's going on in school.
- Build up your child's confidence and assure them they are strong enough to fight off peer pressure.
- Explain the immediate effects of alcohol and the dangers of excessive drinking.
- Explain how alcohol reduces inhibitions, acts as a depressant, can make people throw up, cause slurred speech, and how overdose causes alcohol poisoning. Alcohol poisoning happens when the level of alcohol in the body is so high that it slows the body down to the point where it stops breathing.
- Talk about how drinking is portrayed in the movies and on television.

## **High School**

Your child will be excited to start high school, but will also face increased pressure to start drinking. Think about the issues you want to talk about, imagine how your child will react and how you can respond, then choose a time and place to talk. Keep these things in mind when talking with your teen:

- Explain your expectations, set clear rules and lay out the consequences if your child is caught drinking or intoxicated.
- Not every Vermont high school student drinks. It's not weird for a student to not drink.

- Remind your child that she can always talk to you—even if she makes a mistake and feels scared.
- If you catch your teen with alcohol, try to be more serious than furious. Explain why you're upset and the risks and consequences involved. Ask him about the incident and what happened.
- Always know where your teen is.
- Be sure to praise your child for doing well instead of just criticizing what you feel they are doing wrong.

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